

Sittin' by the pool

Cynthia Lapp

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Psalm 84:1-4

Matthew 13:44-46, 18:19-22

John 13: 34-35

I spend most of my summer evenings at the Prince George's Pool in Mt Rainier, an idyllic spot in suburbia. A grove of trees, acres of grass, a large pool of water, a sandbox big enough for a dozen children are just some of the attraction. The pool is also the place where I cook dinner, catch up on church periodicals, write sermons, discipline my children, have small group, and sing with Friends.

The pool is 50 years old and has a history of being the gathering place and watering hole for folks in the summer. As a cooperative pool, people donate hour upon hour to making sure the grass is cut, the roof is fixed, the showers work, the trees are trimmed and on and on. I continually marvel at the willingness of the members to donate so much time and energy, not to mention money, to this endeavor, especially when some of them hardly ever get into the water.

I have been pondering: how is it that some people have so much time to commit to the pool, not just in the summer but throughout the year? And then it hit me: most of those deeply involved in making the place run do not go to church or temple. Maybe the pool is their "church." (Indeed, it has served as the meeting place for several different house churches over the years.)

Is the pool like a church? The pool is a place where people of all ages find community. The pool is the thing for which they proselytize. The roll is constantly being expanded and members are instructed to find new converts to join the pool thereby storing up credits in their co-op crowns.

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There are more parallels. We gather at the pool to worship: the sun, the water or the shade. We gather to share our burdens: not with just anyone, only with those who can afford the \$500 yearly fee. We have water and while there is plenty of immersing going on, it can't really be called baptism. We break bread - around picnic tables every night. There is even a big canopy that takes eight people to carry. It brings to mind the ark of the covenant as it is carried across the lawn ever so carefully to cover the ones who make the proclamations (usually a band on Saturday night.)

The people at this particular pool are a lot like those we find in this congregation and truth be told there is some overlap. Folks are concerned about the earth, about justice and peace. A lot of them work for non-profits and have spent time in other countries. Some even go to church or temple. Is this all it takes to make a community, to build a church? Some well-intentioned folk who hang out together on a regular basis albeit only for the summer?

While there are plenty of parallels, Kaye reminded me that there is one big difference between the pool and church: the barbed wire fence. This is not the only difference.

Matt 13:44-46

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matt 18:19-22

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

These words from the gospels call me to something much deeper than I experience in the pool. It is not that the relationships that I have at the pool are insignificant. I value the people that I have come to know as my summer friends. But what binds us together is sun and water, grass and trees, *picnic* tables and *ping pong* tables, the swim team and the sandbox. We gather because we love the expansive grounds and we worship the water on a hot day.

When we come to church we gather to sing for joy to God. We worship the **creator** of sun, water or shade, not the water itself. Here, although behind brick walls, we imagine the sparrows and swallows of Psalm 84 that we read about in our community reading. These small creatures point us to God and remind us how we are like the birds, making our home on God's alter.

Here we gather in Jesus' name with an awareness that the holy is among us. All are welcome and there is no admission fee or barbed wire. A gracious donor makes it possible for anyone who wishes to join. In this gathered community we commit ourselves not just to expanding the rolls but to loving the Creator, ourselves and our neighbors. We commit ourselves to forgiveness. Together we strive to forsake all else in pursuit of the priceless reign of God.

A church like this, commitments like this, take a lot of intentionality. To forgive, to love, to live in awareness of God's presence, to pursue the reign of God like there is no tomorrow, this takes some work. And face it, Mennonites are known for work. Mennonite Disaster Service, Voluntary Service, Mennonite Central Committee, and all the other ways we work hard to make peace, feed the hungry, teach those who can't read, spread God's love around the world... The to-do list is endless.

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This past week I took a break from work and instead of going to the pool I went to see Canadian Tracy Penner, in her play *simple gifts*. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that Penner rages about her upbringing in a small Mennonite community in Manitoba. She asks the question that many young Mennonites have probably asked over the centuries: "Is having a good time so bad?"

The standard Mennonite answer has been "Yes, I believe it is. God did not put us here on this earth to have a good time. We are here to help others... have a good time." Well, maybe not a good time but a tolerable time.

Is there a way to forgive, love, be devoted and have fun in the process or at least alongside the process? Must we who follow Jesus be dour and serious like those rural Canadian Mennonites? (Though according to Penner they do enjoy their Tupperware parties.)

As followers of Christ, who take his life seriously, as ones who model our lives after Jesus, do we believe that pleasure is bad or at least not good. Is having a good time so bad? In other words, is it okay for me to be at the pool all summer if it is not church?

I tried to come up with some place in the bible where it says it is okay to have fun. The story of the children of Israel and the subsequent followers of Jesus is a hard read. There are not a lot of happy family vacation stories in the bible, not even all that many happy families. We read about slavery, cruelty, war and famine. There are miracles, daring rescues, travels and storytelling. But generally the followers of God do not have a fun time, at least we don't have record of that part of their lives.

So does that mean that having a good time is bad? For those who use the Declaration of Independence as their guide, the pursuit of happiness is right up there with life and liberty, practically the most important things to being an American. But we do not claim our highest allegiance to this government. We claim our allegiance is to something even higher, the reign of God. Can loving God with all my heart and loving my neighbor as myself actually give me pleasure? Maybe this is the wrong question. Maybe the

question is not about having a good time. The question is "am I still good if I take a break from work?"

As followers of the Jewish Jesus we look to another document. *In the beginning...* after God creates the world and everything in it, God models for us that it is okay to rest, to take a break. God creates a Sabbath, a day of rest. Made in God's image, we too are allowed to take a break, a regular rest from work, to enjoy creation, to appreciate our family and friends, find new awareness of God's presence, to have a good time. It is not only okay, it is holy to rest and recover.

From Genesis 2:

Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. On the seventh day God had finished all the work of creation and so on that seventh day God rested. God blessed the seventh day and called it sacred, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.

We are not having a good time just for its' own sake. The model we have from God is that we are resting from what we have been doing and are rejuvenating ourselves for the work still to come. So how do we take a Sabbath? We can hardly relax for thinking about all the work that is still to be done.

Sometimes we need others to help us slow down; family, friends, animals, children, to be with us and hold us accountable for slowing down, for stopping. (beat, beat)

Sometimes it is best to go away by ourselves, to have a silent retreat. Is that too much work? Then it probably isn't the right Sabbath for you.

For some of us that work *really hard* and play *really hard*, taking a break is *really hard* too. It is only through grace and a lot of practice that we can even take a break, find a Sabbath.

Sometimes it feels wrong to take a break when there is so much suffering and pain, war and waste in the world. Wouldn't it be better to keep working, to keep worrying? I remember the words of Jesus, "*the poor you will always have with you.*" And "*Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will*

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we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is those without faith who strive for all these things."

Even that great Jewish philosopher, Woody Allen, recommends we take a break and watch a comedy or an escapist film now and then. In an interview Allen volunteered that "escapist movies are like air conditioning, they refresh and renew us." They are more help in the long run than going to see a heavy existential movie.

This summer I hope that we each are able to take time to vacation with family and friends, that we take a break from the regular working routine. As we do I invite us to remember the Sabbath. This is a holy time when we stop to look at the work we have done, appreciate creation and those with whom we share it. May it be a holy time when we breathe in gratefulness and an awareness of God's presence and exhale worry. May we remember that we are forgiven and loved and that having a good time isn't so bad.

Psalm 84: 1-4

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
O **LORD** of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the **LORD**;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O **LORD** of hosts,
my King and my God.
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.*

Selah